Gunston Classics

SHORT STORIE SERIES

SHADOWED BY DEATH

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EST. 1999

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GUNSTON CLASSICS
PO BOX 5905
BALTIMORE, MD 21282

GUNSTON CLASSICS

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A Short Story of Arsene Lupin from the collection:
1912

THE CONFESSIONS
OF ARSÈNE LUPIN
By
MAURICE LeBLANC

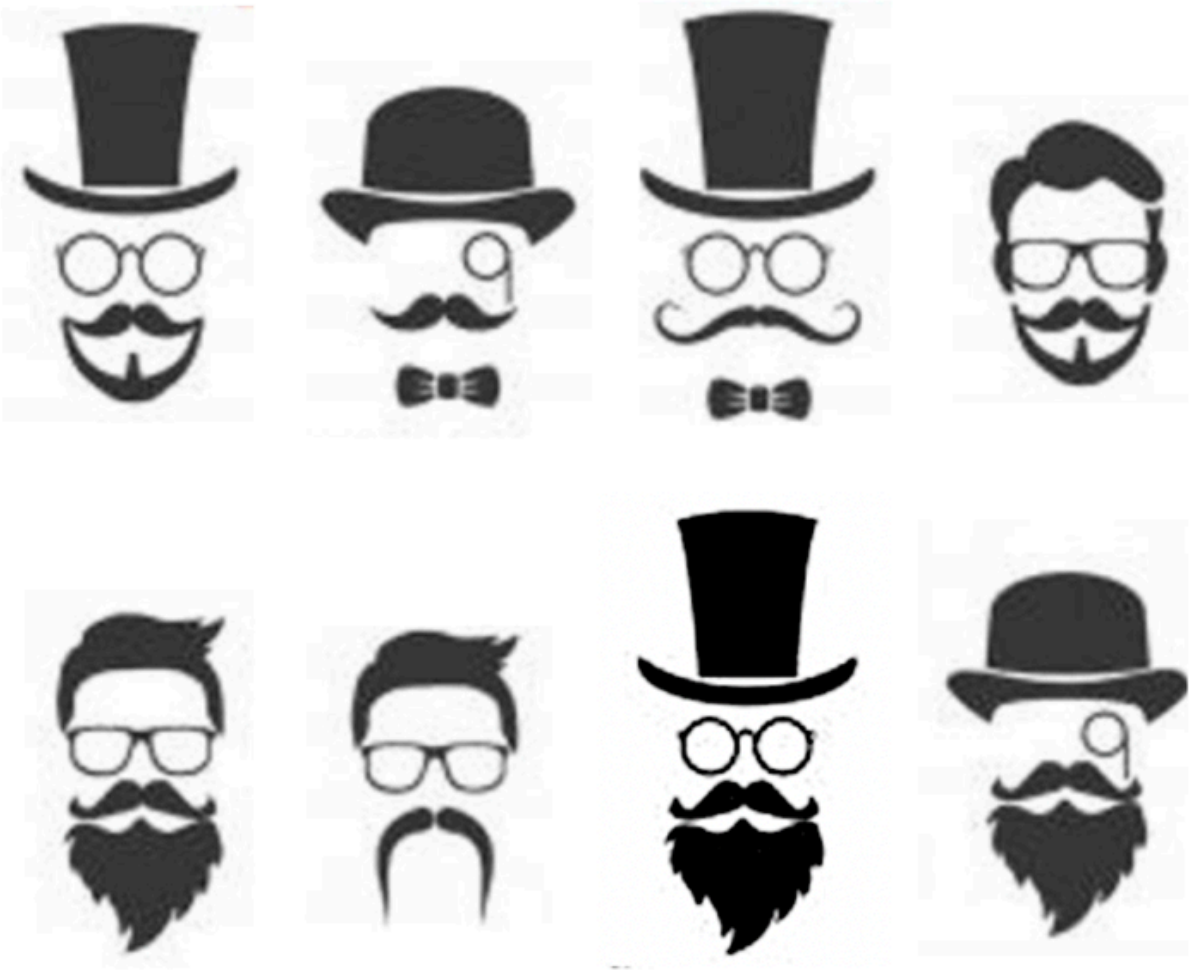
THE MANY DISGUISES
OF

Arsène Lupin

The Gentleman Burglar

SHADOWED BY DEATH

The Confessions of Arsène Lupin



SERIES STORY No. VI

SHADOWED BY DEATH

After he had been round the walls of the property, Arsène Lupin returned to the spot from which he started. It was perfectly clear to him that there was no breach in the walls; and the only way of entering the extensive grounds of the Château de Maupertuis was through a little low door, firmly bolted on the inside, or through the principal gate, which was overlooked by the lodge.

"Very well," he said. "We must employ heroic methods."

Pushing his way into the copsewood where he had hidden his motor-bicycle, he unwound a length of twine from under the saddle and went to a place which he had noticed in the course of his exploration. At this place, which was situated far from the road, on the edge of a wood, a number of large trees, standing inside the park, overlapped the wall.

Lupin fastened a stone to the end of the string, threw it up and caught a thick branch, which he drew down to him and bestraddled. The branch,

in recovering its position, raised him from the ground. He climbed over the wall, slipped down the tree, and sprang lightly on the grass.

It was winter; and, through the leafless boughs, across the undulating lawns, he could see the little Château de Maupertuis in the distance. Fearing lest he should be perceived, he concealed himself behind a clump of fir-trees. From there, with the aid of a field-glass, he studied the dark and melancholy front of the manor-house. All the windows were closed and, as it were, barricaded with solid shutters. The house might easily have been uninhabited.

"By Jove!" muttered Lupin. "It's not the liveliest of residences. I shall certainly not come here to end my days!"

But the clock struck three; one of the doors on the ground-floor opened; and the figure of a woman appeared, a very slender figure wrapped in a brown cloak.

The woman walked up and down for a few minutes and was at once surrounded by birds, to which she scattered crumbs of bread. Then she went down the stone steps that led to the middle lawn and skirted it, taking the path on the right.

With his field-glass, Lupin could distinctly see her coming in his direction. She was tall, fair-haired, graceful in appearance, and seemed to be quite a young girl. She walked with a sprightly step, looking at the pale December sun and amusing herself by breaking the little dead twigs on the shrubs along the road.

She had gone nearly two thirds of the distance that separated her from Lupin when there came a furious sound of barking and a huge dog, a colossal Danish boarhound, sprang from a neighbouring kennel and stood erect at the end of the chain by which it was fastened.

The girl moved a little to one side, without paying further attention to what was doubtless a daily incident. The dog grew angrier than ever, standing on its legs and dragging at its collar, at the risk of strangling itself.

Thirty or forty steps farther, yielding probably to an impulse of impatience, the girl turned round and made a gesture with her hand. The great Dane gave a start of rage, retreated to the back of its kennel and rushed out again, this time unfettered. The girl uttered a cry of mad terror. The dog was covering the space between them, trailing its broken chain behind it.

She began to run, to run with all her might, and screamed out desperately for help. But the dog came up with her in a few bounds.

She fell, at once exhausted, giving herself up for lost. The animal was already upon her, almost touching her.

At that exact moment a shot rang out. The dog turned a complete somersault, recovered its feet, tore the ground and then lay down, giving a number of hoarse, breathless howls, which ended in a dull moan and an indistinct gurgling. And that was all.

"Dead," said Lupin, who had hastened up at once, prepared, if necessary, to fire his revolver a second time.

The girl had risen and stood pale, still staggering. She looked in great surprise at this man whom she did not know and who had saved her life; and she whispered:

"Thank you.... I have had a great fright.... You were in the nick of time.... I thank you, monsieur."

Lupin took off his hat:

"Allow me to introduce myself, mademoiselle.... My name is Paul Daubreuil.... But before entering into any explanations, I must ask for one moment...."

He stooped over the dog's dead body and examined the chain at the part where the brute's effort had snapped it:

"That's it," he said, between his teeth. "It's just as I suspected. By Jupiter, things are moving rapidly!... I ought to have come earlier."

Returning to the girl's side, he said to her, speaking very quickly:

"Mademoiselle, we have not a minute to lose. My presence in these grounds is quite irregular. I do not wish to be surprised here; and this for reasons that concern yourself alone. Do you think that the report can have been heard at the house?"

The girl seemed already to have recovered from her emotion; and she replied, with a calmness that revealed all her pluck:

"I don't think so."

"Is your father in the house to-day?"

"My father is ill and has been in bed for months. Besides, his room looks out on the other front."

"And the servants?"

"Their quarters and the kitchen are also on the other side. No one ever comes to this part. I walk here myself, but nobody else does."

"It is probable, therefore, that I have not been seen either, especially as the trees hide us?"

"It is most probable."

"Then I can speak to you freely?"

"Certainly, but I don't understand...."

"You will, presently. Permit me to be brief. The point is this: four days ago, Mlle. Jeanne Darcieux...."

"That is my name," she said, smiling.

"Mlle. Jeanne Darcieux," continued Lupin, “wrote a letter to one of her friends, called Marceline, who lives at Versailles...."

"How do you know all that?" asked the girl, in astonishment. "I tore up the letter before I had finished it."

"And you flung the pieces on the edge of the road that runs from the house to Vendôme."

"That's true.... I had gone out walking...."

"The pieces were picked up and they came into my hands next day."

"Then ... you must have read them," said Jeanne Darcieux, betraying a certain annoyance by her manner.

"Yes, I committed that indiscretion; and I do not regret it, because I can save you."

"Save me? From what?"

"From death."

Lupin spoke this little sentence in a very distinct voice. The girl gave a shudder. Then she said:

"I am not threatened with death."

"Yes, you are, mademoiselle. At the end of October, you were reading on a bench on the terrace where you were accustomed to sit at the same hour every day, when a block of stone fell from the cornice above your head and you were within a few inches of being crushed."

"An accident...."

"One fine evening in November, you were walking in the kitchen-garden, by moonlight. A shot was fired, The bullet whizzed past your ear."

"At least, I thought so."

"Lastly, less than a week ago, the little wooden bridge that crosses the river in the park, two yards from the waterfall, gave way while you were on it. You were just able, by a miracle, to catch hold of the root of a tree."

Jeanne Darcieux tried to smile.

"Very well. But, as I wrote to Marceline, these are only a series of coincidences, of accidents...."

"No, mademoiselle, no. One accident of this sort is allowable.... So are two ... and even then!... But we have no right to suppose that the chapter of accidents, repeating the same act three times in such different and extraordinary circumstances, is a mere amusing coincidence. That is why I thought that I might presume to come to your assistance. And, as my intervention can be of no use unless it remains secret, I did not hesitate to make my way in here ... without walking through the gate. I came in the nick of time, as you said. Your enemy was attacking you once more."

"What!... Do you think?... No, it is impossible.... I refuse to believe...."

Lupin picked up the chain and, showing it to her:

"Look at the last link. There is no question but that it has been filed. Otherwise, so powerful a chain as this would never have yielded. Besides, you can see the mark of the file here."

Jeanne turned pale and her pretty features were distorted with terror:

"But who can bear me such a grudge?" she gasped. "It is terrible.... I have never done any one harm.... And yet you are certainly right.... Worse still...."

She finished her sentence in a lower voice:

"Worse still, I am wondering whether the same danger does not threaten my father."

"Has he been attacked also?"

"No, for he never stirs from his room. But his is such a mysterious illness!... He has no strength ... he cannot walk at all.... In addition to that, he is subject to fits of suffocation, as though his heart stopped beating.... Oh, what an awful thing!"

Lupin realized all the authority which he was able to assert at such a moment, and he said:

"Have no fear, mademoiselle. If you obey me blindly, I shall be sure to succeed."

"Yes ... yes ... I am quite willing ... but all this is so terrible...."

"Trust me, I beg of you. And please listen to me, I shall want a few particulars."

He rapped out a number of questions, which Jeanne Darcieux answered hurriedly:

"That animal was never let loose, was he?"

"Never."

"Who used to feed him?"

"The lodge-keeper. He brought him his food every evening."

"Consequently, he could go near him without being bitten?"

"Yes; and he only, for the dog was very savage."

"You don't suspect the man?"

"Oh, no!... Baptiste?... Never!"

"And you can't think of anybody?"

"No. Our servants are quite devoted to us. They are very fond of me."

"You have no friends staying in the house?"

"No."

"No brother?"

"No."

"Then your father is your only protector?"

"Yes; and I have told you the condition he is in."

"Have you told him of the different attempts?"

"Yes; and it was wrong of me to do so. Our doctor, old Dr. Guéroult, forbade me to cause him the least excitement."

"Your mother?..."

"I don't remember her. She died sixteen years ago ... just sixteen years ago."

"How old were you then?"

"I was not quite five years old."

"And were you living here?"

"We were living in Paris. My father only bought this place the year after."

Lupin was silent for a few moments. Then he concluded:

"Very well, mademoiselle, I am obliged to you. Those particulars are all I need for the present. Besides, it would not be wise for us to remain together longer."

"But," she said, "the lodge-keeper will find the dog soon.... Who will have killed him?"

"You, mademoiselle, to defend yourself against an attack."

"I never carry firearms."

"I am afraid you do," said Lupin, smiling, "because you killed the dog and there is no one but you who could have killed him. For that matter, let them think what they please. The great thing is that I shall not be suspected when I come to the house."

"To the house? Do you intend to?"

"Yes. I don't yet know how ... But I shall come.... This very evening.... So, once more, be easy in your mind. I will answer for everything."

Jeanne looked at him and, dominated by him, conquered by his air of assurance and good faith, she said, simply:

"I am quite easy."

"Then all will go well. Till this evening, mademoiselle."

"Till this evening."

She walked away; and Lupin, following her with his eyes until the moment when she disappeared round the corner of the house, murmured:

"What a pretty creature! It would be a pity if any harm were to come to her. Luckily, Arsène Lupin is keeping his weather-eye open."

Taking care not to be seen, with eyes and ears attentive to the least sight or sound, he inspected every nook and corner of the grounds, looked for the little low door which he had noticed outside and which was the door of the kitchen garden, drew the bolt, took the key and then skirted the walls and found himself once more near the tree which he had climbed. Two minutes later, he was mounting his motor-cycle.

The village of Maupertuis lay quite close to the estate. Lupin inquired and learnt that Dr. Guéroult lived next door to the church.

He rang, was shown into the consulting-room and introduced himself by his name of Paul Daubreuil, of the Rue de Surène, Paris, adding that he had official relations with the detective-service, a fact which he requested might be kept secret. He had become acquainted, by means of a torn letter, with the incidents that had endangered Mlle. Darcieux's life; and he had come to that young lady's assistance.

Dr. Guéroult, an old country practitioner, who idolized Jeanne, on hearing Lupin's explanations at once admitted that those incidents constituted undeniable proofs of a plot. He showed great concern, offered his visitor hospitality and kept him to dinner.

The two men talked at length. In the evening, they walked round to the manor-house together.

The doctor went to the sick man's room, which was on the first floor, and asked leave to bring up a young colleague, to whom he intended soon to make over his practice, when he retired.

Lupin, on entering, saw Jeanne Darcieux seated by her father's bedside. She suppressed a movement of surprise and, at a sign from the doctor, left the room.

The consultation thereupon took place in Lupin's presence. M. Darcieux's face was worn, with much suffering and his eyes were bright with fever. He complained particularly, that day, of his heart. After the auscultation, he questioned the doctor with obvious anxiety; and each reply seemed to give him relief. He also spoke of Jeanne and expressed his conviction that they were deceiving him and that his daughter had escaped yet more accidents. He continued perturbed, in spite of the doctor's denials. He wanted to have the police informed and inquiries set on foot.

But his excitement tired him and he gradually dropped off to sleep.

Lupin stopped the doctor in the passage:

"Come, doctor, give me your exact opinion. Do you think that M. Darcieux's illness can be attributed to an outside cause?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, suppose that the same enemy should be interested in removing both father and daughter."

The doctor seemed struck by the suggestion.

"Upon my word, there is something in what you say.... The father's illness at times adopts such a very unusual character!... For instance, the paralysis of the legs, which is almost complete, ought to be accompanied by...."

The doctor reflected for a moment and then said in a low voice:

"You think it's poison, of course ... but what poison?... Besides, I see no toxic symptoms.... It would have to be.... But what are you doing? What's the matter?..."

The two men were talking outside a little sitting-room on the first floor, where Jeanne, seizing the opportunity while the doctor was with her father, had begun her evening meal. Lupin, who was watching her through the open door, saw her lift a cup to her lips and take a few sups.

Suddenly, he rushed at her and caught her by the arm:

"What are you drinking there?"

"Why," she said, taken aback, "only tea!"

"You pulled a face of disgust ... what made you do that?"

"I don't know ... I thought...."

"You thought what?"

"That ... that it tasted rather bitter.... But I expect that comes from the medicine I mixed with it."

"What medicine?"

"Some drops which I take at dinner ... the drops which you prescribed for me, you know, doctor."

"Yes," said Dr. Guéroult, "but that medicine has no taste of any kind.... You know it hasn't, Jeanne, for you have been taking it for a fortnight and this is the first time...."

"Quite right," said the girl, "and this does have a taste.... There—oh!—my mouth is still burning."

Dr. Guéroult now took a sip from the cup;

"Faugh!" he exclaimed, spitting it out again. "There's no mistake about it...."

Lupin, on his side, was examining the bottle containing the medicine; and he asked:

"Where is this bottle kept in the daytime?"

But Jeanne was unable to answer. She had put her hand to her heart and, wan-faced, with staring eyes, seemed to be suffering great pain:

"It hurts ... it hurts," she stammered.

The two men quickly carried her to her room and laid her on the bed:

"She ought to have an emetic," said Lupin.

"Open the cupboard," said the doctor. "You'll see a medicine-case.... Have you got it?... Take out one of those little tubes.... Yes, that one.... And now some hot water.... You'll find some on the tea-tray in the other room."

Jeanne's own maid came running up in answer to the bell. Lupin told her that Mlle. Darcieux had been taken unwell, for some unknown reason.

He next returned to the little dining-room, inspected the sideboard and the cupboards, went down to the kitchen and pretended that the doctor had sent him to ask about M. Darcieux's diet. Without appearing to do so, he catechized the cook, the butler, and Baptiste, the lodge-keeper, who had his meals at the manor-house with the servants. Then he went back to the doctor:

"Well?"

"She's asleep."

"Any danger?"

"No. Fortunately, she had only taken two or three sips. But this is the second time to-day that you have saved her life, as the analysis of this bottle will show."

"Quite superfluous to make an analysis, doctor. There is no doubt about the fact that there has been an attempt at poisoning."

"By whom?"

"I can't say. But the demon who is engineering all this business clearly knows the ways of the house. He comes and goes as he pleases, walks about in the park, files the dog's chain, mixes poison with the food and, in short, moves and acts precisely as though he were living the very life of her—or rather of those—whom he wants to put away."

"Ah! You really believe that M. Darcieux is threatened with the same danger?"

"I have not a doubt of it."

"Then it must be one of the servants? But that is most unlikely! Do you think ...?"

"I think nothing, doctor. I know nothing. All I can say is that the situation is most tragic and that we must be prepared for the worst. Death is here, doctor, shadowing the people in this house; and it will soon strike at those whom it is pursuing."

"What's to be done?"

"Watch, doctor. Let us pretend that we are alarmed about M. Darcieux's health and spend the night in here. The bedrooms of both the father and daughter are close by. If anything happens, we are sure to hear."

There was an easy-chair in the room. They arranged to sleep in it turn and turn about.

In reality, Lupin slept for only two or three hours. In the middle of the night he left the room, without disturbing his companion, carefully looked round the whole of the house and walked out through the principal gate.

He reached Paris on his motor-cycle at nine o'clock in the morning. Two of his friends, to whom he telephoned on the road, met him there. They all three spent the day in making searches which Lupin had planned out beforehand.

He set out again hurriedly at six o'clock; and never, perhaps, as he told me subsequently, did he risk his life with greater temerity than in his breakneck ride, at a mad rate of speed, on a foggy December evening, with the light of his lamp hardly able to pierce through the darkness.

He sprang from his bicycle outside the gate, which was still open, ran to the house and reached the first floor in a few bounds.

There was no one in the little dining-room.

Without hesitating, without knocking, he walked into Jeanne's bedroom:

"Ah, here you are!" he said, with a sigh of relief, seeing Jeanne and the doctor sitting side by side, talking.

"What? Any news?" asked the doctor, alarmed at seeing such a state of agitation in a man whose coolness he had had occasion to observe.

"No," said Lupin. "No news. And here?"

"None here, either. We have just left M. Darcieux. He has had an excellent day and he ate his dinner with a good appetite. As for Jeanne, you can see for yourself, she has all her pretty colour back again."

"Then she must go."

"Go? But it's out of the question!" protested the girl.

"You must go, you must!" cried Lupin, with real violence, stamping his foot on the floor.

He at once mastered himself, spoke a few words of apology and then, for three or four minutes, preserved a complete silence, which the doctor and Jeanne were careful not to disturb.

At last, he said to the young girl:

"You shall go to-morrow morning, mademoiselle. It will be only for one or two weeks. I will take you to your friend at Versailles, the one to whom you

were writing. I entreat you to get everything ready to-night ... without concealment of any kind. Let the servants know that you are going.... On the other hand, the doctor will be good enough to tell M. Darcieux and give him to understand, with every possible precaution, that this journey is essential to your safety. Besides, he can join you as soon as his strength permits.... That's settled, is it not?"

"Yes," she said, absolutely dominated by Lupin's gentle and imperious voice.

"In that case," he said, "be as quick as you can ... and do not stir from your room...."

"But," said the girl, with a shudder, "am I to stay alone to-night?"

"Fear nothing. Should there be the least danger, the doctor and I will come back. Do not open your door unless you hear three very light taps."

Jeanne at once rang for her maid. The doctor went to M. Darcieux, while Lupin had some supper brought to him in the little dining-room.

"That's done," said the doctor, returning to him in twenty minutes' time. "M. Darcieux did not raise any great difficulty. As a matter of fact, he himself thinks it just as well that we should send Jeanne away."

They then went downstairs together and left the house.

On reaching the lodge, Lupin called the keeper.

"You can shut the gate, my man. If M. Darcieux should want us, send for us at once."

The clock of Maupertuis church struck ten. The sky was overcast with black clouds, through which the moon broke at moments.

The two men walked on for sixty or seventy yards.

They were nearing the village, when Lupin gripped his companion by the arm:

"Stop!"

"What on earth's the matter?" exclaimed the doctor.

"The matter is this," Lupin jerked out, "that, if my calculations turn out right, if I have not misjudged the business from start to finish, Mlle. Darcieux will be murdered before the night is out."

"Eh? What's that?" gasped the doctor, in dismay. "But then why did we go?"

"With the precise object that the miscreant, who is watching all our movements in the dark, may not postpone his crime and may perpetrate it, not at the hour chosen by himself, but at the hour which I have decided upon."

"Then we are returning to the manor-house?"

"Yes, of course we are, but separately."

"In that case, let us go at once."

"Listen to me, doctor," said Lupin, in a steady voice, "and let us waste no time in useless words. Above all, we must defeat any attempt to watch us. You will therefore go straight home and not come out again until you are quite certain that you have not been followed. You will then make for the walls of the property, keeping to the left, till you come to the little door of the kitchen-garden. Here is the key. When the church clock strikes eleven, open the door very gently and walk right up to the terrace at the back of the house. The fifth window is badly fastened. You have only to climb over the balcony. As soon as you are inside Mlle. Darcieux's room, bolt the door and don't budge. You quite understand, don't budge, either of you, whatever happens. I have noticed that Mlle. Darcieux leaves her dressing-room window ajar, isn't that so?"

"Yes, it's a habit which I taught her."

"That's the way they'll come."

"And you?"

"That's the way I shall come also."

"And do you know who the villain is?"

Lupin hesitated and then replied:

"No, I don't know.... And that is just how we shall find out. But, I implore you, keep cool. Not a word, not a movement, *whatever happens*!"

"I promise you."

"I want more than that, doctor. You must give me your word of honour."

"I give you my word of honour."

The doctor went away. Lupin at once climbed a neighbouring mound from which he could see the windows of the first and second floor. Several of them were lighted.

He waited for some little time. The lights went out one by one. Then, taking a direction opposite to that in which the doctor had gone, he branched off to the right and skirted the wall until he came to the clump of trees near which he had hidden his motor-cycle on the day before.

Eleven o'clock struck. He calculated the time which it would take the doctor to cross the kitchen-garden and make his way into the house.

"That's one point scored!" he muttered. "Everything's all right on that side. And now, Lupin to the rescue? The enemy won't be long before he plays his last trump ... and, by all the gods, I must be there!..."

He went through the same performance as on the first occasion, pulled down the branch and hoisted himself to the top of the wall, from which he was able to reach the bigger boughs of the tree.

Just then he pricked up his ears. He seemed to hear a rustling of dead leaves. And he actually perceived a dark form moving on the level thirty yards away:

"Hang it all!" he said to himself. "I'm done: the scoundrel has smelt a rat."

A moonbeam pierced through the clouds. Lupin distinctly saw the man take aim. He tried to jump to the ground and turned his head. But he felt something hit him in the chest, heard the sound of a report, uttered an angry oath and came crashing down from branch to branch, like a corpse.

Meanwhile, Doctor Guéroult, following Arsène Lupin's instructions, had climbed the ledge of the fifth window and groped his way to the first floor. On reaching Jeanne's room, he tapped lightly, three times, at the door and, immediately on entering, pushed the bolt:

"Lie down at once," he whispered to the girl, who had not taken off her things. "You must appear to have gone to bed. Brrrr, it's cold in here! Is the window open in your dressing-room?"

"Yes ... would you like me to ...?"

"No, leave it as it is. They are coming."

"They are coming!" spluttered Jeanne, in affright.

"Yes, beyond a doubt."

"But who? Do you suspect any one?"

"I don't know who.... I expect that there is some one hidden in the house ... or in the park."

"Oh, I feel so frightened!"

"Don't be frightened. The sportsman who's looking after you seems jolly clever and makes a point of playing a safe game. I expect he's on the look-out in the court."

The doctor put out the night-light, went to the window and raised the blind. A narrow cornice, running along the first story, prevented him from seeing more than a distant part of the courtyard; and he came back and sat down by the bed.

Some very painful minutes passed, minutes that appeared to them interminably long. The clock in the village struck; but, taken up as they were with all the little noises of the night, they hardly noticed the sound. They listened, listened, with all their nerves on edge:

"Did you hear?" whispered the doctor.

"Yes ... yes," said Jeanne, sitting up in bed.

"Lie down ... lie down," he said, presently. "There's some one coming."

There was a little tapping sound outside, against the cornice. Next came a series of indistinct noises, the nature of which they could not make out for certain. But they had a feeling that the window in the dressing-room was being opened wider, for they were buffeted by gusts of cold air.

Suddenly, it became quite clear: there was some one next door.

The doctor, whose hand was trembling a little, seized his revolver. Nevertheless, he did not move, remembering the formal orders which he had received and fearing to act against them.

The room was in absolute darkness; and they were unable to see where the adversary was. But they felt his presence.

They followed his invisible movements, the sound of his footsteps deadened by the carpet; and they did not doubt but that he had already crossed the threshold of the room.

And the adversary stopped. Of that they were certain. He was standing six steps away from the bed, motionless, undecided perhaps, seeking to pierce the darkness with his keen eyes.

Jeanne's hand, icy-cold and clammy, trembled in the doctor's grasp.

With his other hand, the doctor clutched his revolver, with his finger on the trigger. In spite of his pledged word, he did not hesitate. If the adversary touched the end of the bed, the shot would be fired at a venture.

The adversary took another step and then stopped again. And there was something awful about that silence, that impassive silence, that darkness in which those human beings were peering at one another, wildly.

Who was it looming in the murky darkness? Who was the man? What horrible enmity was it that turned his hand against the girl and what abominable aim was he pursuing?

Terrified though they were, Jeanne and the doctor thought only of that one thing: to see, to learn the truth, to gaze upon the adversary's face.

He took one more step and did not move again. It seemed to them that his figure stood out, darker, against the dark space and that his arm rose slowly, slowly....

A minute passed and then another minute....

And, suddenly, beyond the man, on the right a sharp click.... A bright light flashed, was flung upon the man, lit him full in the face, remorselessly.

Jeanne gave a cry of affright. She had seen—standing over her, with a dagger in his hand—she had seen ... her father!

Almost at the same time, though the light was already turned off, there came a report: the doctor had fired.

"Dash it all, don't shoot!" roared Lupin.

He threw his arms round the doctor, who choked out:

"Didn't you see?... Didn't you see?... Listen!... He's escaping!..."

"Let him escape: it's the best thing that could happen."

He pressed the spring of his electric lantern again, ran to the dressing-room, made certain that the man had disappeared and, returning quietly to the table, lit the lamp.

Jeanne lay on her bed, pallid, in a dead faint.

The doctor, huddled in his chair, emitted inarticulate sounds.

"Come," said Lupin, laughing, "pull yourself together. There is nothing to excite ourselves about: it's all over."

"Her father!... Her father!" moaned the old doctor.

"If you please, doctor, Mlle. Darcieux is ill. Look after her."

Without more words, Lupin went back to the dressing-room and stepped out on the window-ledge. A ladder stood against the ledge. He ran down it. Skirting the wall of the house, twenty steps farther, he tripped over the rungs of a rope-ladder, which he climbed and found himself in M. Darcieux's bedroom. The room was empty.

"Just so," he said. "My gentleman did not like the position and has cleared out. Here's wishing him a good journey.... And, of course, the door is bolted?... Exactly!... That is how our sick man, tricking his worthy medical attendant, used to get up at night in full security, fasten his rope-ladder to the balcony and prepare his little games. He's no fool, is friend Darcieux!"

He drew the bolts and returned to Jeanne's room.

The doctor, who was just coming out of the doorway, drew him to the little dining-room:

"She's asleep, don't let us disturb her. She has had a bad shock and will take some time to recover."

Lupin poured himself out a glass of water and drank it down. Then he took a chair and, calmly:

"Pooh! She'll be all right by to-morrow."

"What do you say?"

"I say that she'll be all right by to-morrow."

"Why?"

"In the first place, because it did not strike me that Mlle. Darcieux felt any very great affection for her father."

"Never mind! Think of it: a father who tries to kill his daughter! A father who, for months on end, repeats his monstrous attempt four, five, six times over again!... Well, isn't that enough to blight a less sensitive soul than Jeanne's for good and all? What a hateful memory!"

"She will forget."

"One does not forget such a thing as that."

"She will forget, doctor, and for a very simple reason...."

"Explain yourself!"

"She is not M. Darcieux's daughter!"

"Eh?"

"I repeat, she is not that villain's daughter."

"What do you mean? M. Darcieux...."

"M. Darcieux is only her step-father. She had just been born when her father, her real father, died. Jeanne's mother then married a cousin of her husband's, a man bearing the same name, and she died within a year of

her second wedding. She left Jeanne in M. Darcieux's charge. He first took her abroad and then bought this country-house; and, as nobody knew him in the neighbourhood, he represented the child as being his daughter. She herself did not know the truth about her birth."

The doctor sat confounded. He asked:

"Are you sure of your facts?"

"I spent my day in the town-halls of the Paris municipalities. I searched the registers, I interviewed two solicitors, I have seen all the documents. There is no doubt possible."

"But that does not explain the crime, or rather the series of crimes."

"Yes, it does," declared Lupin. "And, from the start, from the first hour when I meddled in this business, some words which Mlle. Darcieux used made me suspect that direction which my investigations must take. 'I was not quite five years old when my mother died,' she said. 'That was sixteen years ago.' Mlle. Darcieux, therefore, was nearly twenty-one, that is to say, she was on the verge of attaining her majority. I at once saw that this was an important detail. The day on which you reach your majority is the day on which your accounts are rendered. What was the financial position of Mlle. Darcieux, who was her mother's natural heiress? Of course, I did not think of the father for a second. To begin with, one can't imagine a thing like that; and then the farce which M. Darcieux was playing ... helpless, bedridden, ill...."

"Really ill," interrupted the doctor.

"All this diverted suspicion from him ... the more so as I believe that he himself was exposed to criminal attacks. But was there not in the family some person who would be interested in their removal? My journey to Paris revealed the truth to me: Mlle. Darcieux inherits a large fortune from her mother, of which her step-father draws the income. The

solicitor was to have called a meeting of the family in Paris next month. The truth would have been out. It meant ruin to M. Darcieux."

"Then he had put no money by?"

"Yes, but he had lost a great deal as the result of unfortunate speculations."

"But, after all, Jeanne would not have taken the management of her fortune out of his hands!"

"There is one detail which you do not know, doctor, and which I learnt from reading the torn letter. Mlle. Darcieux is in love with the brother of Marceline, her Versailles friend; M. Darcieux was opposed to the marriage; and—you now see the reason—she was waiting until she came of age to be married."

"You're right," said the doctor, "you're right.... It meant his ruin."

"His absolute ruin. One chance of saving himself remained, the death of his step-daughter, of whom he is the next heir."

"Certainly, but on condition that no one suspected him."

"Of course; and that is why he contrived the series of accidents, so that the death might appear to be due to misadventure. And that is why I, on my side, wishing to bring things to a head, asked you to tell him of Mlle. Darcieux's impending departure. From that moment, it was no longer enough for the would-be sick man to wander about the grounds and the passages, in the dark, and execute some leisurely thought-out plan. No, he had to act, to act at once, without preparation, violently, dagger in hand. I had no doubt that he would decide to do it. And he did."

"Then he had no suspicions?"

"Of me, yes. He felt that I would return to-night, and he kept a watch at the place where I had already climbed the wall."

"Well?"

"Well," said Lupin, laughing, "I received a bullet full in the chest ... or rather my pocket-book received a bullet.... Here, you can see the hole.... So I tumbled from the tree, like a dead man. Thinking that he was rid of his only adversary, he went back to the house. I saw him prowl about for two hours. Then, making up his mind, he went to the coach-house, took a ladder and set it against the window. I had only to follow him."

The doctor reflected and said:

"You could have collared him earlier. Why did you let him come up? It was a sore trial for Jeanne ... and unnecessary."

"On the contrary, it was indispensable! Mlle. Darcieux would never have accepted the truth. It was essential that she should see the murderer's very face. You must tell her all the circumstances when she wakes. She will soon be well again."

"But ... M. Darcieux?"

"You can explain his disappearance as you think best ... a sudden journey ... a fit of madness.... There will be a few inquiries.... And you may be sure that he will never be heard of again."

The doctor nodded his head:

"Yes ... that is so ... that is so ... you are right. You have managed all this business with extraordinary skill; and Jeanne owes you her life. She will thank you in person.... But now, can I be of use to you in any way? You told me that you were connected with the detective-service.... Will you allow me to write and praise your conduct, your courage?"

Lupin began to laugh:

"Certainly! A letter of that kind will do me a world of good. You might write to my immediate superior, Chief-inspector Ganimard. He will be glad to hear that his favourite officer, Paul Daubreuil, of the Rue de Surène, has once again distinguished himself by a brilliant action. As it happens, I have an appointment to meet him about a case of which you may have heard: the case of the red scarf.... How pleased my dear M. Ganimard will be!"

FIN

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Arsène Lupin

Fictional gentleman thief and master of disguise created by French writer Maurice Leblanc

Arsène Lupin is a fictional gentleman thief and master of disguise created in 1905 by French writer Maurice Leblanc. The character was first introduced in a series of short stories serialized in the magazine Je sais tout. The first story, "The Arrest of Arsène Lupin", was published on 15 July 1905. Lupin is often described as the criminal counterpart to Sherlock Holmes, often encountering "Herlock Sholmès" in his own adventures. The character has also appeared in a number of books by other writers as well as numerous films, stage plays,